



A TASTE OF RAIL HISTORY



The Orient Express exhibition features, among other exhibits, its locomotive and tender (above) and a carriage (top) of the train which started running in 1883. ST PHOTOS: JOEL CHAN, KELVIN CHNG

The Orient Express stars in a new exhibition at the Gardens by the Bay that showcases the luxury, mystery and romance of travel



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After the Once Upon A Time on the Orient Express exhibition made its debut in Paris in 2014, there were plans to bring the show to Singapore.

But the wheels were set in motion only two years later. Along the way, the organisers had to deal with administrative and cross-border challenges – and a global pandemic.

This month, the Orient Express of France, the stuff of legend, finally pulled into Singapore and is stationed at the West Lawn of Gardens by the Bay – its home for the next six months.

More than 100 tonnes of the locomotive – with a carriage for carrying fuel and water in tow and two additional carriages – left Paris on

Nov 3 – marking the first time the Orient Express carriages are shipped overseas in the train's history of more than 100 years.

The exhibition, a culmination of talks since 2015 between the French and Singapore governments, opens today and runs till June 12.

Believed to be the largest of its kind in the world during the pandemic, the show is expected to attract at least 270,000 visitors. After Singapore, it will travel to China, Egypt and Venice.

Visitors will be greeted by an imposing 158-year-old green locomotive with an attached coal compartment that helped steam-power the train, which left Paris on its maiden journey on June 5, 1883, for Varna, Bulgaria.

From there, passengers heading to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in Turkey had to make the rest of their trip by ship.

From June 1, 1889, the train started a direct route to Constantinople, which took four days and had stopovers at Munich, Budapest and Belgrade.

The trans-European coal-guzzling steam-driven locomotives and luxury carriages were created by Belgian civil engineer Georges Nagelmackers, who founded Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, the company which owned the original Orient Express trains.

Mr Nagelmackers, born into a family of bankers, hobnobbed with European royalty and the elite and designed the ultra-luxury train for big spenders.

Inside the pop-up tented exhibition area here, which features a facade styled to look like a 19th-

century Parisian train station, there are over 2,000 sq m of ephemera.

Two massive blue-and-gold carriages made of reinforced steel – a Pullman made in 1920 and a Fourgon in 1929 – take centre stage.

Their interiors feature sculptor René Prou and architectural glass panels showing Bacchanalian maidens by renowned sculptor of crystal and glass René Lalique.

In a separate replica of a dining carriage, haute cuisine will be served for lunch, dinner, high tea and Sunday brunch by three-Michelin-starred French chef Yannick Alleno.

Visitors will be greeted by a sprawling museum boutique and an Orient Express Road Cafe, which makes coffee brews from places along Orient Express routes such as Baghdad, Aleppo and Cairo.

STEEPED IN HISTORY

The original Orient Express route in 1883 was from Paris across Europe through Strasbourg, Munich, Vienna, Budapest and Bucharest before ending in Constantinople.

Its sister train, the Simplon Orient Express, also travelled a route from Paris to Istanbul, but headed south through Lausanne, Simplon, Milan, Venice, Belgrade and Sofia before arriving in Istanbul.

The Orient Express has seen its fair share of history.

Apart from inspiring literary works such as Graham Greene's Stamboul Train (1932) and Agatha Christie's Murder On The Orient Express (1934), it has also been

involved in cross-border tensions and was even blown up by Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.

By 1977, the original Orient Express routes were retired after more than 100 years of storied journeys. In 1982, the Venice Simplon Orient Express started retracing the original Orient Express route and continues the service till today.

SIX-YEAR JOURNEY TO SINGAPORE

The exhibition was first held in 2014 in Paris in the courtyard of the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA), or the Arab World Institute. It featured a locomotive and three carriages and drew more than 250,000 visitors over four months. IMA, a foundation set up to promote Arab culture in 1981, is co-owned by the French government and 22 Arab countries that are

members of the Arab League. It is also one of the organisers of the Singapore show.

Other organisers include IMA president Jack Lang, 81; the exhibition's general commissioner Claude Mollard, 79; Orient Express company vice-president Lydie Blanseau de Saint Lager, 36; and artist and executive producer Lydie Blanseau, who is in her 40s.

Mr Mollard tells The Straits Times the French organisers had tried to bring the exhibition here after its Paris debut.

"At that time, Ms Blanseau was already in Singapore," says the French arts administrator and author. "The then Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong invited Mr Lang and myself. From there, the idea of organising the exhibition here sprang up."

It was not until last year that the organising team helmed by

Ms Blanseau fast-tracked the project after the key pieces – a locomotive and tender constructed in 1862 and two carriages – were secured for the exhibition.

She worked with Gardens by the Bay, Singapore Tourism Board and the French Ministry of Culture to iron out administrative kinks.

The owner of Visionairs Gallery Asia, an art gallery in Capitol Piazza, says: "Since 2016, we have been facing many stops and challenges, but isn't this the purpose of a train? Stopping at a station before moving again."

"It became more challenging with the pandemic. Against all odds, the team pulled through to present an exhibition linked to travel, culture and gastronomy. I hope Singaporeans love it."

Mr Felix Loh, chief executive of Gardens by the Bay, says Covid-19 presented an especially tough challenge for the transcontinental

EXHIBITION

MANAGERS

ORGANISERS

ARTISTS

DESIGNERS

DEVELOPERS

INNOVATORS

INVENTORS

INVESTORS

INFLUENCERS

INNOVATORS

INVENTORS

INFLUENCERS

INNOVATORS